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From reintroducing the *Indigofera* plant to West Bengal, to experiments with dyeing stone, and even a perfume in the offing, India's blue gold is finding modern champions

BLUEPRINTS FOR A REVIVAL

Sumana Mukherjee

In a room well beyond the *Blue Futures: Reimagining Indigo* exhibition at Hampi Art Labs stands a large plastic vat, wrapped in a bright red-and-black tartan blanket. Night temperatures in Vidyanagar, the Jindal South West (JSW) township at the edge of which the art gallery and residency are situated, drop to about 16°C and that vat of indigo is as precious as a baby in the eyes of all the artists in attendance.

So much so that the first display the visitor encounters at the exhibition is a vat of the blue dye. Meera Curam, the curator of the show, removes the lid with a flourish, allowing us to gaze at the floating 'flower', a coalesced skin formation that indicates successful processing of the dye. The gallery is air-conditioned against the harsh sun of the day but the vat itself is well insulated, just like the one in the workshop.

The care could be a metaphor for indigo in the Indian culturescape right now. From the west to the east and the south to the north, this ancient dye – predominantly used for fabric in most of recorded history – is the focus of new cultivation, fresh innovations and novel applications. Indigo-dyed stone? Done. Indigo-infused metal? Patented. Indigo you can wear as a perfume? So close.

It might be a reach to call it the second indigo revolution, but the resurgence of interest in the *Indigofera tinctoria* plant is showing up in exhibitions such as *Blue Futures*, in textile artworks snapped up by leading collectors, in laboratories pushing the boundaries of the dye, in designer textiles, and yes, in artisanal crafts as well.

While the simultaneous showcasing can be put down to coincidence, practitioners are aware that it's been a long time coming. Over the past couple of decades, as capitalist systems of thought and economy came under scrutiny, alternative thinkers have sought out slower, more mindful and sustainable ways of living. The growing popularity of natural dyes is only one of its manifestations.

From growing and farming the indigo plant to fermenting and developing the pigment, each of the processes is necessarily meditative and unhurried, a delicate tango of time, skill, learning and nurture. Much of this corpus of expertise is inherited and undocumented, and there is little official effort to preserve this massive knowledge base.

Artistic entrepreneurs see this lacuna as an opportunity for an intervention. And, wiser after centuries of appropriation of Indian craft know-how, they're ready with guardrails for their discoveries. The last is important because, as textile designer Mayank Mansingh Kaul points out, much of the research into indigo and, indeed, natural dyeing, is driven by foreign – especially Japanese – demand.

Blue Futures: Reimagining Indigo will be on show at Hampi Art Labs till January 28, 2026.

The writer and editor is based in Bengaluru.

> **This renewed love for natural indigo** feels like a return to memory — an attempt to remember our past with care. It is also a quiet movement back towards the earth, and towards our shared sense of humanity
>
> ANURADHA SINGH
> Director of Jaipur-based Nila House, an organisation working with indigo at the intersection of craft, design, sustainability and community empowerment

Kavin Mehta

Uses indigo to dye natural materials such as stone

Immersion takes on new meaning at the *Blue Futures* show, which can make visitors feel like they are in a blue dreamscape, or in a fantastic underwater expedition, surrounded by spot-lit, surreal objects of joy. Against the twilight-darkened floor-to-ceiling windows of the gallery, however, one artwork draws every eye. It's a large, almost rectangular stone sculpture, etched with ever lighter shades of indigo. *Container*, as it's called, is a vase made of western Indian limestone (wrongly described as sandstone in the title card) and painted with natural indigo dyes — of which the limestone is also a component. The stark, evocative work gives circularity a whole new nuance.

A few feet away stands another piece, this one untitled. Reminiscent of Dutch graphic artist Escher's puzzle-like works, it's also crafted out of a limestone block — but this one is dyed in a single shade of indigo, its darkness throwing into sharp relief the glittering embedded silica, invisible in its natural white state.

Both works are by Kavin Mehta, industrial designer and accidental artist. "I became interested in indigo as a student in the U.K. when I was researching products that get better with age; it was that metamorphosis [think how a pair of jeans reflects the shape and postures of its wearer] that really spoke to me," says Mehta. "Back in Ahmedabad, I was building my design studio in an old mining hub called Gota, when I started tinkering with the stone around. I learnt from traditional stonemasons, that's how I started my art practice."

Mehta's art brought him in touch with Sanjay Lalbhai of Arvind Ltd., one of the world's largest denim manufacturers. Keen to initiate deeper research into his key dye in its natural form, Lalbhai set up the Indigo Art Museum in Ahmedabad in 2019 and asked Mehta to head it, with a special brief to discover indigo's affinities with non-textile materials. Those investigations have led to 20 patents for the museum, including fusions of indigo with aluminium and leather, as well as ongoing artistic explorations.

Mehta himself also works with wood, clay, ceramics and other natural materials in conjunction with natural indigo, a process he describes as a "dialogue" with his own vision, with each element possessing its own unpredictabilities. "No chemical blue gives an artist the range indigo can. Nothing has ever challenged me like indigo — every time I think I know it, it surprises me," he says. "As a designer, I build for longevity, not merely sustainability, and indigo resonates with that philosophy."

Bappaditya Biswas

Reintroduced the indigo plant in West Bengal

A textile designer, successful businessman, fabric engineer, and chintz artist. Bappaditya Biswas wears many hats, but the most recent jewel in his crown comes from reintroducing the indigo plant in Bengal. "A very strong sense of oppression and fear is still associated with indigo in eastern India," says Biswas, of the erstwhile epicentre of the British trade in the dye in the 1800s. "In Phulia, they call it the 'evil crop', they said it ruined the land, they even built over the historical vats."

Fired by the idea of a dye that could inspire a revolution — the *nil bidroho* (indigo revolt) of 1859 was a landmark peasant movement against the extreme cruelty of British planters looking to maximise indigo output — Biswas began researching indigo in 2006. But it was only in 2020 that he was able to convince Sanjay Pramanik, a Phulia-based master weaver for his Byloom label, to grow the plant.

"For 165 years, indigo had only lived in the imagination. There isn't even a record of the variety of indigo that grew here," says Biswas. "We procured the seeds of the *Indigofera tinctoria* from Tamil Nadu [it's an old crop there], and it took to the conditions really well. What is also encouraging is that it helped the locals discover its benefits compared to chemical dyes."

At present, the indigo output is too small to take care of the demands of Byloom — about 20% of its production uses natural dyes — but Biswas puts the Phulia indigo to excellent application in the large handwoven, handspun cotton canvases he prefers for his meticulously crafted chintz art.

Biswas's interest was first piqued by a large handpainted chintz from the TAPI Collection (a private collection of textile and art in Surat) in the early 2000s. He followed it up with a seven-day workshop with French-Canadian artist Michel Garcia in 2009. But it was only during the pandemic lockdown that he was able to put paint to cloth, remaking chintz with foliage, fauna and Vishnu avatars in natural dyes.

11.11/eleven eleven

Learning to paint and print with indigo

That this renewal of interest in indigo has legs is clear from the research being conducted independently into various aspects of the dye. Their originators often choose to showcase their breakthroughs first as art; commercialisation, they are aware, will follow. As a part of the recent Madras Art Weekend, Chennai-based boutique Collage, for instance, exhibited an installation by craft-forward design brand 11.11/eleven eleven to mark their formulation of indigo paste.

"Indigo has always been used as dip-dye — 100% natural indigo cannot be used for printing. But we like to paint and print with natural dyes," says Shani Himanshu, co-founder of the 16-year-old label, pointing out that till date, a chemical reduction would be necessarily added to natural indigo to allow printing. (This is also the reason commonly available indigo prints get a bad rap for bleeding, rubbing and fading, since the chemical process makes it susceptible to oxygen.)

"The question was, how can we keep indigo in a reduced form naturally. After years of R&D, we discovered the answer in indigo paste. It uses a natural binder, which is our intellectual property, and the moment it reacts with water, it oxidises and turns blue."

Coming on the back of two decades of experimenting with indigo, 11.11/eleven eleven is one of the few textile enterprises (if not the only one) to have their own vats, capable of fermenting 5,000 litres of natural dye in their New Delhi studio. The research was aimed at ensuring all-round safety for the artisans who would be working with the material, says Himanshu. "We also believe what you wear should breathe with you, it should be good for you," he adds. "Indigo is a medicinal plant, it has many beneficial properties."

The 11.11/eleven eleven installation at Collage (first launched at their Mumbai store opening last year) encapsulated this participatory idea by displaying tapestries created when people walked through indigo paste onto large canvases, 'painting' it, so to say, with their feet. Each piece is thus unique and distinct. This is exactly the spirit that, Himanshu hopes, will be carried forward as artists, designers and textile practitioners make the stabilised indigo paste their own.

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The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, oil painting by English artist John Martin (1789-1854); and (bottom) author Sarah Joseph.
(WIKI COMMONS, H. VIBHU)

FIRE AND BRIMSTONE

In her reimagining of the biblical tale of Sodom and Gomorrah, Sarah Joseph raises complex questions about duty, patriarchy, and the corrupting influence of wealth

Stanley Carvalho

The trend of reinterpreting ancient religious narratives seems to be gaining ground. Close on the heels of Benyamin's *The Second Book of Prophets*, a radical retelling of the life and times of Jesus Christ and his disciples, comes Sarah Joseph's *Stain*, translated from the Malayalam original, *Kara*, by Sangeetha Sreenivasan.

Joseph is an acclaimed Malayalam novelist, commentator and activist known for her recasting of scriptural stories, having won plaudits for her novel, *The Vigil* (2014), based on the *Ramayana*.

Stain is a hauntingly lyrical story based on an ancient biblical tale (from the *Book of Genesis*), told through a new and imaginative lens. The narrative revolves around Abraham, Lot and his daughters, set largely in Sodom and Gomorrah.

Sodom, situated at the southern end of the Dead Sea near the Jordan valley, once a trustworthy land, has turned into a wealthy but decaying city, hostile to foreigners. Lot, a righteous Eberite (later called Hebrews) and believer in the one God, 'Yahweh', is determined to cure Sodom of its ills.

"I'll bring my hammer down on their rock and set fire to their vineyards – the ones that lead to lust, madness, chaos and death. I will win their hearts and minds," he avers.

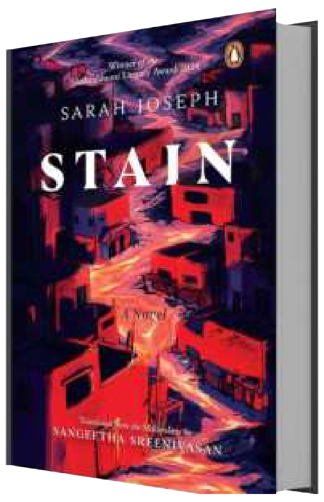
Lot goes about his mission with seriousness and sincerity, taking head-on the wrong-doers and the corrupt system in Sodom only to be condemned and attacked, compelling him to ponder in anguish. "What is the right course of action? To leave things untouched, unchallenged – because that is the way of the world? Or to reach in, disturb the stillness, and try, however clumsily, to set it right?"

Beyond the archetype

The author depicts Sodom not solely as a biblical symbol of sin; rather, envisioning it as a modern inferno where opium flowers bloom and Mammon worship culminates in spiritual decay. In such a setting, Lot stands apart from the rest and the author fleshes out his humane side, something the *Bible* has glossed over.

Sodom's description in the *Bible* is spare but the author, through understated characters, their conversations and circumstances, paints an almost fantastical picture of a deep and dark netherworld built around Baal-worship, where child sacrifices are normalised and where women have lost count of how many times they have been raped.

Lot's wife Edith, who turns into a pillar of salt for defying orders not to look back while fleeing Sodom, becomes a powerful symbol of resistance. The author portrays that act as something fraught with loss and longing, her transformation as much about resistance as chastisement.



Stain
Sarah Joseph, trs
Sangeetha Srinivasan
Penguin India
₹599

In the *Bible*, Lot's two daughters commit the damnable act of conceiving children with their father to continue the family line. The incestuous relations result in the birth of Moab and Ben-Ammi, founders of the Moabites and Ammonites. Artists and writers, over the centuries, have been drawn to this grim and disturbing episode interpreting the daughters' decision on theological and moral grounds. The author tackles the issue boldly raising profoundly complex questions about duty, free will and circumstance, laying bare the paradox of survival.

Lot's daughters are characterised by their mental fortitude, surviving their roller-coaster life of having it all and now stripped of everything and universalising their inner conflicts far beyond the biblical archetype. Lot's wife too is no shadow figure – her desires, her laments and her frozen form become symbols of enduring sorrow.

The othering of people

Through her characters, Joseph grapples with theological matters on a personal level. What does it mean to be obedient and dutiful? To defy, betray or sin? To go against the grain? To venture into uncharted territory that refuses to accept you? There are no easy answers. The novel's title symbolises more than just sin or shame. It is the memory of a burnt-out Sodom that stains its survivors.

Equally, the author delves into contemporary issues relating to wealth and its corrupting influence, the thin line dividing what is morally right or wrong, the othering of people and how they negotiate power. Crucially, she looks closely at patriarchy that had divine sanction, gender, power and survival, and the limits to which daughters will go to preserve life, and at what cost.

Stain is not a brisk read with an action-packed plot; it seems deliberately well-paced, demanding concentration given the detailing and symbolism, the moral dilemmas, the emotional nuances, all grounded in a biblical narrative. Needless to say, there are some loose ends that leave the reader with a sense of ambiguity and unanswered questions.

The reviewer is a Bengaluru-based independent journalist.

Lives in limbo

Set across Pakistani cities and American campuses, the stories in this collection evoke the full spectrum of human emotions

Lopamudra Basu

Pakistani author Kanza Javed's anthology, *What Remains After a Fire*, is a meticulously crafted set of eight stories that offer unusual and deeply moving glimpses of contemporary life in Pakistan and the U.S. Several stories in the collection offer perspectives of international students, their dislocation in a new landscape compounded by an intense nostalgia for home.

The volume also captures the interior lives of impoverished people in Pakistani cities such as Lahore, focusing on the alienation experienced in the intimate space of the family. Javed moves effortlessly between these locations and social classes, emphasising the fragility of human relationships.

The opening story, 'Rani', depicts the uneasy relationship between a woman suffering from Alzheimer's and her granddaughter who is her caregiver. The granddaughter carries out her duties while processing the collapse of her own marriage. She remembers the dark secrets of her grandmother's marriage and her cruelty during her younger, mentally alert years.

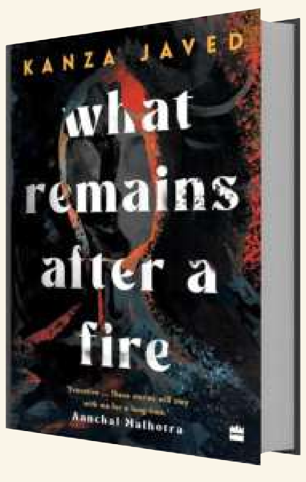
The intimacy that caregiving engenders between people is a theme also re-invoked in 'The Last Days of Bilquees Begum'. Unlike Rani, Bilquees is more of a victim of feudal patriarchy, having lost her young and literary lover to the familial fury arising from a love match across caste lines. Bilquees is haunted by guilt and remorse, and shares fragments of her past with Noorie, a young Christian woman who has been reluctantly hired by Bilquees' husband to care for her. Noorie's fragile dreams of romance are thwarted just like Bilquees' in the past, though Noorie is able to at least resume her studies by the end of the story.

Shades of violence

Several stories here focus on Pakistani working-class characters who eke out a precarious living as servants or caregivers of the rich. Sometimes, they also fall prey to dangerous addictions such as gambling or drugs. In 'Stray Things Do Not Carry a Soul', we witness a young boy's life unspool as his father's drug abuse grows and fuels his penchant for shooting stray dogs in the neighborhood. The son wants to emulate his father, but the story ends with his rejection of toxic masculinity.

The final story 'Ruby' also depicts a character leading a precarious life as a single Christian mother in Lahore. Ruby is brave and spirited, and determined to rewrite her destiny. However, she is curiously distant with her only daughter who yearns for her affection. The scourge of religious violence raises its ugly head and dashes their hopes for a better life in the end.

If Javed depicts life in Pakistani cities as a struggle for the urban poor, a different set of problems engulfs the Pakistani men and women who pursue their dream of a higher education in the U.S. The landscape of the new country often erupts with unexpected violence, like the



What Remains After a Fire
Kanza Javed
HarperCollins India
₹499

suicide of a college student in 'It Will Follow You Home' or the death of a high school student in a mass shooting in 'My Bones Hold a Stillness'. In both cases, these unexpected deaths rekindle unresolved traumas, including sexual assault and the silencing of victims. The stable relationship of a young couple in Karachi unravels when they become international students in a U.S. college town in 'Worry Doll'.

Javed has a keen eye for evoking place and its influence on humans. Whether in Pakistani cities or American campuses, she presents every landscape as a palimpsest of buried memories with lurking dangers that unexpectedly alter life's trajectories.

The reviewer is a Professor of English at University of Wisconsin-Stout.

Sketching reality

This novel by an art world insider blends mystery with socio-political commentary

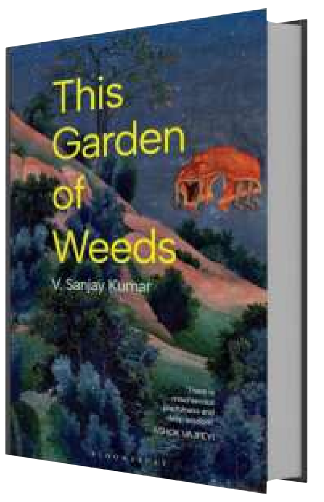
Chintan Girish Modi

Set in the art world, V. Sanjay Kumar's melancholic yet playful novel, *This Garden of Weeds*, must be lauded for its timing. Its arrival coincides with the highlights of the culture season, including Art Mumbai, Madras Art Weekend, Serendipity Arts Festival, and the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. This book urges readers to take a step back and reflect on what they are consuming and why.

The plot revolves around Maya, a "narcoholic" artist, whose death in Mumbai is a mystery not only to her daughter, Tara, but also to the police. Tara sets out to discover unknown parts of her mother's story, wondering, "Was she ever in love with someone besides herself?" This curiosity takes her to Vadodara, where her mother received her training and honed her practice.

In the process of unravelling this mystery, the author brings Tara in close contact with a host of characters who populate his narrative. Tara comes across as a woman who has held on to years of resentment because she did not receive the validation and

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK



This Garden of Weeds
V. Sanjay Kumar
Bloomsbury India
₹599

encouragement she wanted from her mother.

Swimming in a heady cocktail of emotions, where grief mixes with anger, and empathy blends in with voyeurism, Tara learns who Maya was beyond her maternal role. In writing her journey, the author rescues the act of mourning from the sentimentality that is usually associated with it. He also liberates Tara from the societal expectation of airing her private loss like an open wound.

Unwelcome spaces

While there is a mystery to be solved, this book is not a whodunnit. It is more of a socio-political commentary on the ecosystem within which artists, curators, gallerists, critics, auctioneers and collectors operate. As an insider to this industry, through his association with Sakshi Gallery as a director, the author seems absolutely comfortable making jibes at those who elevate the vacuous and the pretentious through jargon that is clearly more style than substance.

The snobbery and gatekeeping that exist in these hallowed portals are exposed when Ardeshir, a gallerist, discourages Praveena, the daughter of a picture framer, from pursuing her desire to be an artist. The contempt for new money, among those who live off generational wealth, is well depicted in the interaction where Ardeshir tells Salil, a businessman, "I think taste is in some ways an inheritance, what you grow up with. You, sir, have self-professed *baniya* origins."

As an outlier with the risk-taking ability that only an entrepreneur can bring to the table, Salil comes up with the idea of starting a reality show around the personal and professional lives of artists. The old guard is convinced that the idea will be a flop, but Salil is willing to stake his money. Fortunately, his daughter Nupur, who aspires to be a curator, is on his side.

Unfortunately, many of the characters often seem like mouthpieces for ideas rather than fully etched out personalities. Anjana, the art critic addicted to red wine, *motichoor laddoo*, *hing kachori* and Raag Malkauns, might be the only exception. She is mercurial, witty and imaginative. One wishes that she had more to do apart from damaging people's self-esteem.

On the brighter side, the title is haunting. To assume that it is only about Maya's addiction is limiting. It celebrates the persistence of those who grow in spaces where they are unwelcome.

The reviewer is a writer, educator and literary critic. His work has appeared in various anthologies, including Fearless Love (2019) *and* Bent Book (2020).

Women weave carpets at a handloom outlet in Srinagar. (GETTY IMAGES)

THE INVISIBLE HALF

Victoria Bateman rewrites the history book to include women workers and entrepreneurs who had not been given the recognition they deserve

Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta

Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter," says the proverb made famous by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe. Victoria Bateman's *Economica* reads not so much like a history as a powerful narrative of forensic archaeology – one that excavates the contributions of women, and returns them to the pages of economic history.

While traditional historians have presented the past as a land in which men were the producers and women only reproducers, Bateman convincingly shows that this was never the case. In doing so, she creates a more comprehensive account of our common heritage.

At a conference for women in technology last week, I reminded the participants that women belong in every lane, at every table, and everywhere where decisions are taken. Even today, frustratingly, one often has to argue that women can indeed work in technical fields – not only as software engineers, but also as plumbers and masons. *Economica* shows that women have in fact always participated in technical and economic work. In ancient Egypt, women built pyramids; in ancient Rome, they did plumbing work; and in the Midlothians, in the 19th century, they worked in coal mines.

Powerful hunters

We have been given to imagine that in the Stone Age, men hunted animals for food while women merely stayed in caves, drew on the walls, and cared for children. Overturning this myth, Bateman points out that women in the Stone Age were also powerful hunters. High up in the Peruvian Andes, the remains of a young female hunter – locally called Warawara or 'star' – were found 13,000 feet above sea level. She had been ceremonially laid to rest along with a 24-piece large-mammal hunting toolkit. Indeed, adds Bateman, of the 27 big-game hunters whose remains have been found in archaeological sites across the Americas dating between 12000 and 8000 BCE, 11 (that is, 40%) have been identified *as those of women*.

Although the advent of the plough, pastoralism, and property rights meant that the balance gradually shifted towards the establishment of a patriarchal way of life, the extent of such control varied. In Mesopotamia, Lamassi ran a thriving textile weaving business by herself in Ashur while her husband Pusu-ken moved to a merchant colony in Kanesh, 1,200 km away; they kept in touch through letters in which Lamassi listed the details of her business dealings. In China, Hsi-Ling, the wife of the Yellow Emperor, was the first to unravel a cocoon from the mulberry tree and discover the secret of silk. In the Indus Valley, the scientific analysis of skeletons has revealed that women were more highly related within their communities than men; in other words, society was matrilocal.

Early in human history, then, women also hunted and foraged; as human settlements formed, they participated in activities outside the home, and ran flourishing businesses.

War and gender divide

Gender divides began to widen with warfare. When herdsmen invaded Mesopotamia, they introduced what Bateman

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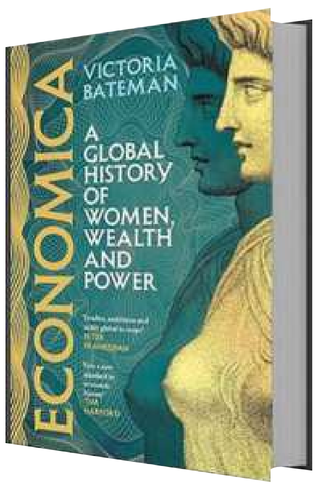


Economica: A Global History of Women, Wealth and Power
Victoria Bateman
Hachette India
₹899

describes as "arguably the first legalised system of patriarchy, one that made women the property of men – supposedly for their own protection."

As war correspondent Christina Lamb has famously noted, rape has always been as much a weapon of war as a machete or a machine gun. This phenomenon was acute in ancient Greece.

"Few societies in history have done more to render women invisible than ancient Greece," observes Bateman. Women were not permitted to participate in political life, law, or the military. They were under the legal control of male guardians, with control passing from a girl's father to her husband after marriage. Women captives were trophies of war. Women had to veil their hair and themselves, even weaving the cloth with which to do so. Helen of Troy wove her own cloth, as did Penelope, wife of Odysseus, ostensibly to keep suitors at bay while waiting for her husband's return. Women's work was systematically devalued, making them financial dependents. "Ancient Athens might have invented democracy, but it was a democracy only for men," observes Bateman.

Rather than a straight line leading towards a more gender-equal utopia, then, history has been more of a roller coaster. And yet over the millennia, women have left their imprint on every aspect of human life. Bateman provides some gripping examples. In ancient Pompeii, after an earthquake left the city severely damaged, Julia Felix successfully ran her Praedia or Roman villa complex as a property entrepreneur, converting the private bathhouse into a public facility for a fee, and rented out small shops and rooms in the complex.

In 19th century America, the businesswoman Hetty Green, probably the richest American woman of her time and referred to as the "Witch of Wall Street," advised women to buy low and sell dear – especially in real estate. The 20th century brought software pioneers such as Mary Coombs, the first woman to programme a computer for business applications; and Dina St Johnston, who founded the first programming company in the U.K. in the 1950s, producing software for the BBC, Unilever, the RAF, and British Rail.

Busting myths

In contrast to the myth that women began to emerge from the home into the workplace only in the 20th century, Bateman shows that in every major civilisation, women have indeed participated in economic activity, with or without pay, or with less pay than men, until they were deliberately excluded.

In the 19th century, it was the Victorians who pushed women back home, both in England and across the empire. Bateman regards the deliberate exclusion of women from the economic sphere as the beginning of any civilisation's decline. It is a persuasive argument.

The reviewer is in the IAS.

Ways of seeing

Sameer Hamdani uses monuments as apertures through which the larger history of Srinagar comes into view

A view of Jamia Masjid in Srinagar. (NISSAR AHMAD)

Attaul Munim Zahid

The imagined city always overwhelms the reality of it. Srinagar, the imagined city from my university days, is a place I long for, and I hesitate before the Srinagar for what it really is. In its sweep and certainty, the first line of Sameer Hamdani's new book *City of Kashmir - Srinagar: A Popular History* echoes my ambivalent feeling, 'For many of its inhabitants, the city of Srinagar exists as a memory of what it was, and not what it is,' proclaiming like the universal declaration that opens Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. I may be conceited about my feelings, perhaps, given that I left Srinagar less than two years ago after an equally short two-year stay. But then, what lies beneath the city we think we remember?

Mixing worlds

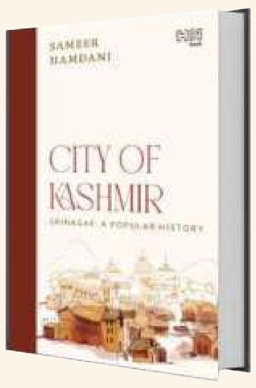
Divided in two parts – 'City in Text' and 'City and Life' – Hamdani in *City of Kashmir*, the first of a two-volume work, has written a long durée narrative which keeps returning to Srinagar as a place of mixing worlds. The Mughals may have sold Kashmir as *jannat* or *firdous,* and later, tourists lodged in hotels along the Dal lake may have repeated that aesthetic obsession, but Srinagar must be more than that. Hamdani writes about an ostentatious inscription on a tombstone of a merchant which traces a family that moves across three great Muslim empires of Ottoman Lebanon, Safavid Iran and Mughal India before rooting in Srinagar. Elsewhere, a bilingual permit in Persian and Tibetan, sealed by the Dalai Lama, reveals how Kashmiri merchants circulated through Tibet. Sufi lineages arrive from across the Persian-speaking world; by the 16th and 17th centuries the shrines and cemeteries of Srinagar map a network stretching from Arabia and Iran to Central Asia.

Instead of writing a linear political chronicle, Hamdani reconstructs Srinagar obliquely by taking individual monuments like Jamia Masjid, Khanqah-i Maula, Dumath or Mazar-i Shoura and uses them as apertures through which the larger history of Srinagar comes into view. Each structure becomes a palimpsest of building and rebuilding. Srinagar was shaped by Karkota kings consecrating Vishnu temples; by Shahmiri *sultans* rebuilding after fire and flood; by Timurids and Persians arriving as mendicants and merchants; or by Mughals who left their gardens and forts behind. As his friend tells him that 'life always finds a way to grow in the interstice,' Hamdani's method seems precisely to illuminate those interstices where the city's history germinated.

Stubborn centrality

Srinagar's status as capital has never been uncontested. We witness this desire from Lalitaditya, the eighth-century monarch, building the monumental city of Parihaspur, hoping it would eclipse Srinagar, to a senior minister in the 1990s trying to revive the idea of shifting the capital to build a modern metropolis, only to arrive at the capital, which has thrived in defiance. *City Of Kashmir* uses these anecdotes as proof of Srinagar's stubborn centrality. Empires rise and decline, rulers move their courts, ministers float their fantasies, yet the city stands and absorbs them all.

'City and Life', the second part of the book, gives Srinagar a pulse and a heart. Distilling a whole city into self-contained vignettes, these short chapters have the rhythm of James Joyce's *Dubliners* or Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities.* The chapter *Chiragan* (illumination) reconstructs the festivals of light that once animated Srinagar at night. *Chai* traces the journey of tea from *nun-chai* to the colonial Lipton era to the courtly rituals of high tea. *Tanz* (satire) watches residents wield a rough but restrained humour without descending into the obscenity common elsewhere in North India. *Nar* (fire) meditates on Srinagar as a wooden city repeatedly vulnerable to flames or *Tajiran-i Shahr* reads the rise of the merchant class against shifts in trade routes and political patronage.
The emotional centre of this section is a chapter called *An Iranian Lady in the City.* It is an evocative portrait of Zuhra Bibi, a frail widow who visited Hamdani's home during his childhood to collect alms, speaking exquisite Persian and reciting Hafiz. She becomes an entry point into Srinagar's long history of Iranian merchants and Sufi travellers whose gravestones still lie in the city's *musafir mazars,* the graveyard of travellers. Through one woman's fading silhouette, Hamdani revives the cosmopolitan network of Srinagar with the outside world that shaped the Valley. For those who live there, Srinagar is home and a source of quiet (sometimes pompous) pride. For those who come from outside, it is a city you fall in love in and fall in love with, only to find yourself, in time, falling out of favour with it or discovering it has fallen out of favour with you. But it never leaves your imagination. *City Of Kashmir* compels you to remember the city in its true proportions. It gives you back a Srinagar sturdy enough to hold your love, your disillusionment and your longing. All at once.

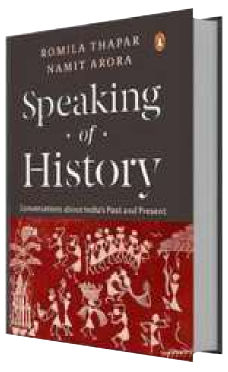


City of Kashmir – Srinagar: A Popular History
Sameer Hamdani
Hachette India
₹699

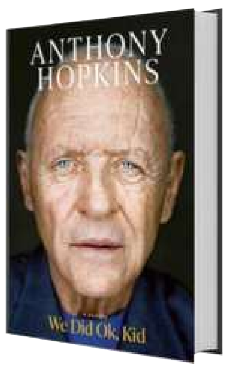
The reviewer is a writer and journalist with experience in publishing.

BROWSER

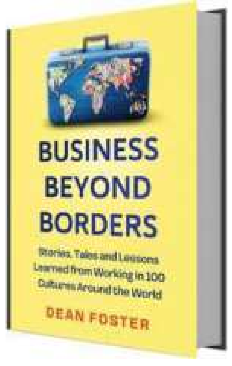
Speaking of History
Romila Thapar, Namit Arora
India Allen Lane
₹699
Why is history so misunderstood in some circles? A veteran historian and a social critic decided to have a conversation, as Thapar writes in the Preface. From caste and gender to religion, they revisit contested terrain and ask what can we really know about our past.



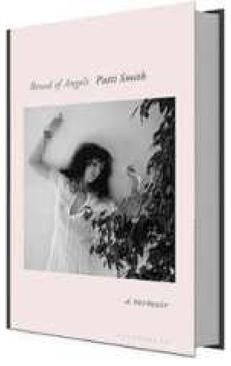
We Did Ok, Kid
Anthony Hopkins
Simon&Schuster
₹599
Born in a small Welsh steelworks town, Sir Anthony Hopkins grew up around tough men who eschewed all show of vulnerability. In his heartfelt and honest memoir, he writes about his difficult childhood, his illustrious film and theatre career, and the hard path to sobriety.



Business Beyond Borders
Dean Foster
Hachette India
₹799
In a world of global networking, a writer explains how he overcame cultural challenges. From negotiating with Bedouins in the Libyan Sahara, to managing Brazilians in Rio de Janeiro, and losing a government 'handler' in Beijing, each story illustrates cultural issues global managers need to understand.



Bread of Angels
Patti Smith
Bloomsbury
₹699
This memoir takes readers through the early years of a noted singer, songwriter and poet. Her heroes were Arthur Rimbaud and Bob Dylan and she wrote songs like *Dancing Barefoot*. She also provides a glimpse into how she found love, and her life on the road.



BLUEPRINTS FOR A REVIVAL

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

Ally Matthan

Making an 'earthy, dense and green' indigo perfume

In 2019, entrepreneur Ally Matthan was in an IIM-Ahmedabad classroom, trying to conceptualise a perfume project. "Every single idea I put out was scuttled. Anchal Jain, co-chair of the Creative and Cultural Businesses Programme, kept urging me to look within," she remembers. "By then, I was deeply embedded in the indigo community through textiles [as founder of the research-driven Registry of Sarees]. And I think that's what led to my experiments with the indigo plant for a perfume."

A graduate of ISIPCA (Institut Supérieur International du Parfum, de la Cosmétique et de l'Aromatique Alimentaire), Versailles, Matthan believes fragrance is a way for her to "sensorially understand the depth and soul of indigo". She explains, "In the Indian system — think *attars* — the process of extraction is very different from modern methods. The language reflects it too; the essential oils [derived through steam distillation] are the *rooh*, the soul."

Over the lockdown years, Matthan started growing her own indigo on the outskirts of Bengaluru and has, since then, experimented steadily to arrive at its perfect aromatic representation. "Different crop cycles have, at different times, given us different extractions — that is why we have spent so long in development," she says. "I like working with the roots and stem of the plant — the leaves produce a scent that's similar but not the same — and blend the essential oils thus extracted with other ingredients to provide the complete indigo experience, the closest reflection of my own immersion in indigo."

Ask Matthan to describe the fragrance — scheduled to roll out in the next four to five months — and the adjectives roll off her tongue: earthy, woody, amber, dense and green, while also being humid and wet. "I also think, as much as there is lightness about indigo, there's also a darkness," she says. "Indigo is not a fragrance by itself, it comes with a context and a subtext. If the colour is its personality, I feel the fragrance is its soul."

> **Much like *ikat*, indigo is a medium for** us in India to connect with the world. Africa has indigo, as do other parts of Asia. The next stage for us as curators is to start looking at connections that Indian textiles have with other parts of the world, especially the Asia-Africa paradigm
>
> **MAYANK MANSINGH KAUL**
> Textile designer, writer and curator

Visalakshi Ramaswamy

Adding blue to Chettinad's palm leaf basketry

Back in 2000, when Visalakshi Ramaswamy established the M.Rm.Rm. Cultural Foundation to work with the local cultural heritage of Chettinad, she chose *kottan*, the woven palmyra leaf basket traditional to the region, as her first project. A quarter century and many other initiatives later, it continues to be the product the Foundation is best known for. But Ramaswamy is not satisfied.

"We started the *kottan* project to generate employment for village women. Palm is locally available but, for most of the lifespan of the project, we've had to use chemical colours as they were the only option," says Ramaswamy. "A few years ago, we started experimenting with natural dyes. While we've been able to produce 28 colours with natural dyes, indigo has proved to be a challenge."

About a year ago, the Foundation reached out to the Indigo Art Museum for help. "We thought it would be great to take it up because the leaf has some inherent properties we hadn't worked with," says Kavin Mehta, the lead on the research project. The chief issue Mehta's eight-member R&D team faced with the palm leaf was its hydrophobic nature: as a water-proximate plant, it is naturally resistant to moisture, which includes the indigo dye. The next step was preparing a dye vat with affinities towards the raw material. After the washing and the final fixing, the leaf also needs to retain its natural malleability for the weaving. Though the team has achieved some success with the colour, the artisans are not happy with the brittleness of the indigo-dyed leaf.

But Mehta is not about to give up either. And so, hopefully some day not too far in the future, the palm leaf *kottan,* in addition to the yellows, greens, reds and blacks it is already available in, will also turn a brilliant blue.

THE GLOBAL IMPRINT OF I.M. PEI

A landmark two-venue retrospective in Doha explores the late Pritzker-winning architect's career, from early modernist experiments to the Museum of Islamic Art

Gayatri Sinha

Although Ieoh Ming Pei, aka I.M. Pei, lived for over a century, building an iconic global practice, a major retrospective of his work was long delayed. Curated by Aric Chen and Shirley Surya, the exhibition which opened in 2024 at Hong Kong's M+ Museum has been more than seven years in the making. Pei had dismissed the idea of a retrospective for years until this one, before he died in 2019.

In October, the exhibition travelled to Doha where it is spread over two venues till February 14, 2026. *I.M. Pei: Life in Architecture* displays his professional journey at the Al Riwaq gallery, while *I.M. Pei and the Making of the Museum of Islamic Art: From Square to Octagon and Octagon to Circle* is a more personal tribute at the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA), which Pei designed at the close of his long career. It features 400 objects, including never-before-seen drawings, models, photographs, films and archival material.

Arranged in six sections, the exhibition is a demanding and concentrated viewing of drawings, maquettes, videos and sculptural reproductions of some of his masterly designs. In films and videos, Pei acknowledged the influence of Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier, although he softened the harsh effect of Brutalist architecture. Presented like a vast, austere drawing board, the exhibition reveals the depth of his practice, from public housing to grand projects.

Blending various styles

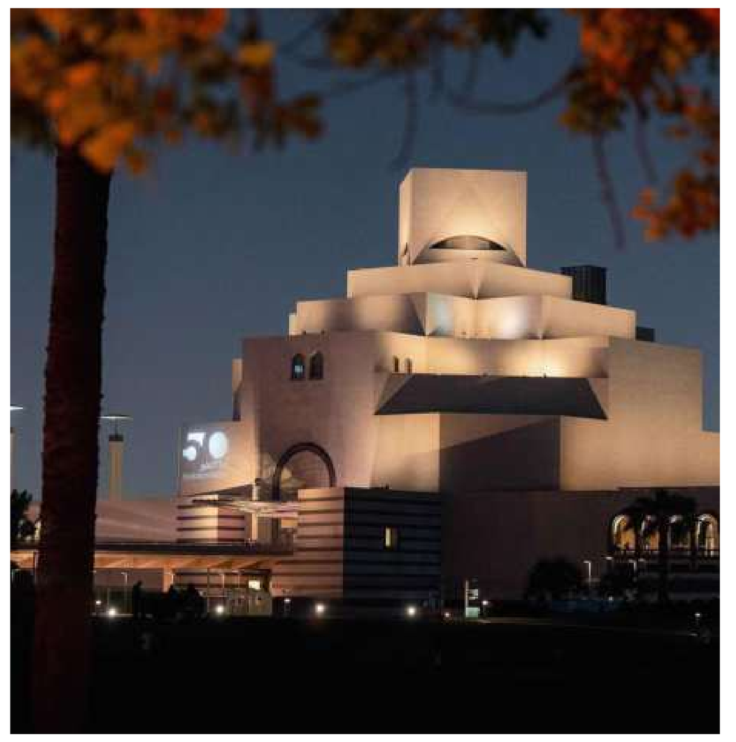
So far-flung and culturally diverse were the geographies that he worked in, that Pei's practice may best be understood through maquettes and photographs of his rich, and frequently controversial career. Hailing from an artistic family that traced its roots to the Ming dynasty, Pei was fascinated by Shanghai's classical Chinese garden and Shikumen architecture, which blended Chinese and western features.

China closed its borders between 1949 and the 1970s, and Pei formed his own company to enter the building boom in America, then dominated by architectural giants, including Frank Gehry, Norman Foster and Louis Kahn. Pei received several museum commissions early on. The models on display include the Emerson Museum (1961-68) with galleries in four cubes around a central atrium, the Johnson Museum at Cornell, Des Moines Art Centre and the East Building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington with its challenging triangular design – all airy, accommodative civic spaces.

An unkind world

The global fraternity of architects was not always kind to the successful Pei and that may have contributed to the lack of research on his practice. His dramatic effects with sharp angles, a touch of sci-fi worldbuilding and designs, which were considered overly cool or detached, were panned when they first appeared. Several of his most innovative projects remained 'paper architecture': from a museum in Athens based on a Greek Orthodox church to the unbuilt Polaroid tower. That Pei was undeterred is visible in his design for the U.S.'s Dallas Civic Center, with its sharp angular wedges, inverted pyramid form and sci-fi Brutalist design, that featured in the film *RoboCop* (1987).

The Guangzhou-born, Pritzker prize-winning architect integrated the works of Henry Moore and Alexander Calder into his design. Particularly interesting is the shift that Pei was to make from designing in museums and public installations in the U.S. to working in China, notably his razor-sharp, edgy design for the Bank of China. In a 1970 photograph, Chinese officials in Mao suits curiously examine his model for Fragrant Hill hotel, built on a former imperial hunting ground. Pei determined not to create a tower in the ancient Forbidden City, choosing instead a modernist building. He called it his most difficult project. The unorthodox mix of styles is recognised as influencing generations of Chinese architects, and also led to Pei's spectacularly successful Suzhou Museum (2006).



Transcultural legacy (Clockwise from far left) I.M. Pei at the Louvre Pyramid; his works at Museum of Islamic Art (MIA); at Al Riwaq gallery, Doha; and MIA. (GETTY IMAGES, MUSEUM OF ISLAMIC ART, QATAR MUSEUMS)

Proximity to power

Famously patronised by Jackie Kennedy Onassis who gave him an out-of-turn commission to design the Kennedy Memorial Library, Pei was immensely prolific and attracted the envy of his contemporaries. Francois Mitterrand chose him for the renovation of the entrance to the Louvre.

His proximity to power is evident in his selection for the MIA by the Emir of Qatar. Yet again, Pei was not the winning architect. Fresh from his controversial and highly lauded design of the Louvre Pyramid (1989), Pei was chosen for the Doha project ahead of front-runners such as India's architect and urban planner, Charles Correa.

Musings on the mosque

Coming out of retirement to accept the MIA's commission (completed in 2008), Pei insisted on a waterbody surrounding the structure. Acknowledging his ignorance of Islamic design, he travelled extensively to such cultural sites as the Great Mosque in Damascus, Spain, Tunisia and Fatehpur Sikri to understand the essence of Islamic architecture. It was at the ninth-century mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, which draws on a square, octagon and a circle for its central dome, that he had an epiphany for his virtuoso building. The gleaming white building, on graded steps with flowing water, reminds one of Kashmir's Mughal Gardens and Spain's Alhambra palace.

To view the biographical material on Pei on an upper floor of the MIA and then the marvels of the Islamic world on the lower vault-like level is a breathtaking experience. The entire space is dedicated to art treasures, including rare Persian paintings, the 19th century Damascus Room, and Safavid, Iranian and Ottoman pieces in glass, ceramic and textiles. Indian viewers will be especially taken by the display of wedding jewels, from the erstwhile royals of Bharatpur, Patiala and Jaipur, that dazzle and dismay. While the government of India stepped in to prevent the export of the Hyderabad crown jewels, these extraordinary pieces of brilliant craftsmanship now have another resting place.

The art critic and curator is based in New Delhi.

GREEN HUMOUR

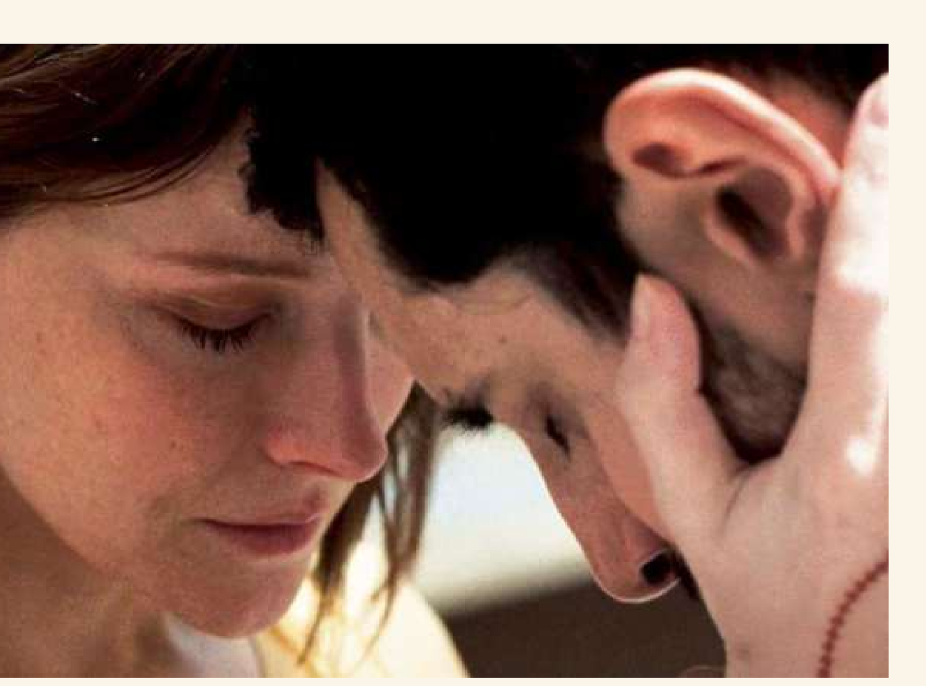
Rohan Chakravarty

IN CONVERSATION

MAKING HAMLET 'BROWN AND REAL'

Riz Ahmed, the award-winning actor, musician, filmmaker and activist, on reclaiming Shakespeare, and why storytelling, at its core, is an act of defiance

Akanksha Kamath



Fresh view Actor Riz Ahmed; and (right) a still from *Hamlet*, featuring Morfydd Clark and Ahmed.

It is a late summer afternoon. Riz Ahmed takes to the stage to deliver a keynote that feels less like a celebrity talk and more like a manifesto. He begins by revisiting perhaps the most quoted line in the English language: "To be or not to be." But rather than dwell on existential paralysis, he reframes it as a call to action, urging storytellers to reclaim the radical pulse of their craft. With his deft humour and unshakable sincerity, he traces how the centuries-old text of *Hamlet* finds fresh resonance today – especially in our fractured, fraught era of injustice, division and compromise.

We are at the 10th edition of BoF Voices, an annual gathering by the London-based fashion portal in the English countryside of Oxfordshire, that brings together fashion and luxury's movers, shapers, and trailblazers.

Days later, just before the gala celebrations on the final day of Voices, Ahmed sits down to speak of his new film adaptation of *Hamlet*, set in contemporary London and anchored in a British South Asian family. Critics have given it both proverbial brickbats and flowers and Ahmed doesn't shy away from that critique. He says he wanted *Hamlet* to be urgent, personal, inclusive, as a text that echoes for those who have ever felt outside the canon. His message to the audience at Voices, and now to readers, is clear: storytelling is not a luxury or a distraction. It is our most powerful technology of empathy.

In the conversation that follows, edited for clarity and flow, Ahmed, who was Oscar nominated as best actor in 2021 for *Sound of Metal*, charts his path from actor-musician to auteur, from that first encounter with Shakespeare in school to a film born of identity, rage and tenderness.

Question: *Okay, so, why* Hamlet*? You said it was 13 years in the making?*

Answer: Yes, it was 13 years of development when I first approached Michael Lesslie, the writer, with the idea of *Hamlet* set in an Indian family, in an Indian family business. But the initial idea to make a film like that dated back to when I was 17 years old, so almost 20 years... A lot of those storylines in Shakespeare's original that can feel a bit dated in a British context actually are very alive and kicking – whether it's the prevalence of spiritual belief, or the different layers of family duty and obligation, or considerations about who you marry and how, or in particular, the tradition of someone marrying their sister-in-law if their brother dies and there are orphans to take care of.

All of these are not some kind of strange anachronistic thing, as they often are when it's staged in Britain or in a Western context. These are part of our lived experience. And so just bringing *Hamlet* into an Indian family suddenly makes it feel real, immediate, vivid and contemporary... it's somehow about making those core themes of love, loss, loyalty, duty, honour feel as immediate and real as possible. That happens when you make Hamlet brown.

Q: *Make Hamlet brown. I love that. Did you have to really unpick the original text?*

A: No, not really. We could have copied and pasted directly. But Lesslie did adapt the original in a really ingenious way to make it more accessible. He cut lots of exposition, made it lean, mean and action-packed. And Aneil Karia, our director, decided we don't want this to feel like you're observing a performance. We want to be on Hamlet's shoulder, walking into a room with him, inside his mind.

Aneil works a lot in choreography. We're both fans of Akram Khan who choreographed the dance sequence at the wedding, at the heart of the show. So I created a kind of dance, a movement map for the emotional journey to keep it visceral and emotional, not intellectual. *Hamlet* also has Sheeba Chaddha – one of the most profound and powerful actors I've worked with. She should be considered a national treasure in India.

Q: *A lot of your speech was about how storytelling has been "de-fanged and de-radicalised". And I feel like your creative work now seems to be very much an act of activism... when you are choosing to tell stories that give a new perspective to people.*

A: Stories inherently have a point of view, and the stories I'm interested in offer just a different point of view than what we're used to. What I think is really interesting is that stories that stretch our empathy, stretch our consciousness and stretch culture in that way, are considered a form of politics or activism. I think that says something about how powerful and confronting stories can be – and about how accustomed we've become to the same old stories – rather than it saying much about my own intentions.

I'm trying to tell stories that I can be in, that I can see myself in, and that take us out of our comfort zone because I think it's exciting. If that's scandalising or controversial for people, I guess it just makes it a bit more fun.

Q: *So, you've recently become a father. Does that change how you engage with the world, with storytelling in any way?*

A: I'm not sure yet. I guess the biggest way is that every time I step away from my family to immerse myself in a role, I'm stepping away from my family. So that means there's maybe a higher bar for some of the work I take on. It probably means I have more of an appetite to build some of my own projects. Maybe it's something to do with nesting and building that I feel like I want to build a creative home for myself as well. And then building a creative family of collaborators. Maybe that's bled into how I approach my creative life.

Q: *Where are you at the moment, creatively?*

A: Two projects at the top of next year – one is a half-hour comedy [on Amazon's Prime Video] and one is *Hamlet*. The last thing I did was a thriller [*Relay*] where I barely spoke for most of the film. I'm interested in doing more comedy – I miss that. I haven't done a big one since *Four Lions* [2010]. I've never done horror before. There are some more action-oriented things I'm looking at.

I just feel very creatively restless, curious, and I have ADHD – I can get bored easily. So, the above is what keeps me going creatively.

The other thing that inspires me is this strange and destabilising time in our industry because of the advent of AI, the rise of streamers, the globalisation of storytelling. People watch anything from anywhere. There are subtitles now. I think those moments of disruption are moments of opportunity.

Q: *Someone in the talks yesterday said we should "zag while everyone is zigging". I'm curious to know, when it comes to AI, where do you see the opportunity in that?*

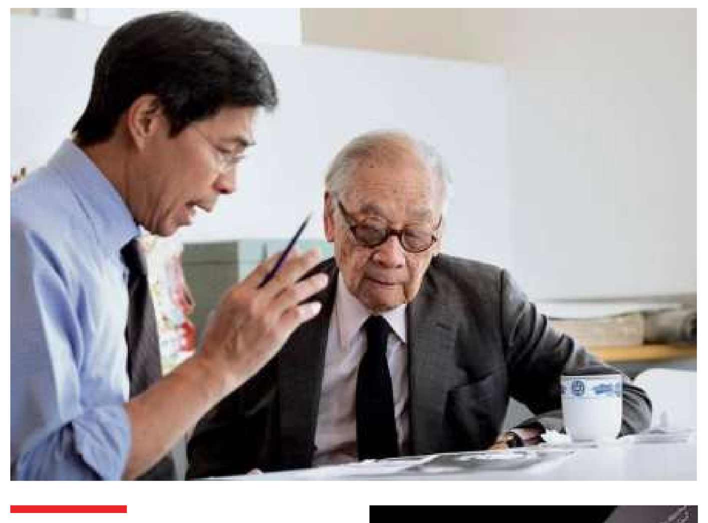
A: You know what's interesting? I think it's going to force us to re-evaluate what telling a story really is and what creativity really is. I think we're going to see more of a focus on process. I've worked with Wes Anderson [in *The Phoenician Scheme*] – people talk about how extremely stylised, very authored, every frame feels. You feel the author's hand, how lovingly made it is. I think that's going to have an increasing sense of value for people. That's going to hold more weight and that's what creativity is really about. That's why children are so good at creating. For them, it's not about the results, it's about the process. They're just enjoying the process.

The interviewer is an independent journalist based in London, writing on fashion, luxury and lifestyle.

INTERVIEW

'My father, the humanist'

New York-based architect Li Chung (Sandi) Pei talks about the monumental first retrospective to his legendary father, I.M. Pei



(Clockwise from left) Li Chung (Sandi) Pei with his father I.M. Pei; Bank of China Tower, Hong Kong; his work on display at Museum of Islamic Art, Doha. (COURTESY LI CHUNG (SANDI) PEI, SOUTH HO SIU NAM AND MUSEUM OF ISLAMIC ART, DOHA)

Tanushree Ghosh
tanushree.ghosh@thehindu.co.in

"I never knew him to put a line on a drawing without careful thought," says Li Chung (Sandi) Pei, 75, about his father and master architect, I.M. Pei (1917-2019). The New York-based architect attributes his father's design of the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York, in the early 60s, as probably having influenced his own decision to become an architect.

I.M. Pei believed that "buildings should be judged not by their designer but by how they serve their communities," says Sandi. And that's why Pei senior resisted exhibitions that spotlighted him, and would say, "Architects come and go, but their creations live on, for better or worse, as part of a long historical continuum," Sandi recalls, adding that even as controversies courted his father, "Of nearly 100 projects built during his career, only a handful have been demolished. The majority have become cherished, protected icons."

In this exclusive email interview, Sandi talks about the ongoing retrospectives in Doha – *I.M. Pei and the Making of the Museum of Islamic Art: From Square to Octagon and Octagon to Circle* at the Museum of Islamic Art and the other at the Al Riwaq gallery – and his father's transcultural legacy. Edited excerpts:

Question: *Could you describe your architect-father in one word?*

Answer: I would describe him not as a modernist – that's too narrow – but as a humanist. He cared about human scale and experience, respecting history and local traditions, and about integrating arts and sciences. He balanced technological innovation with aesthetic and social meaning.

Q: *What are your impressions of this retrospective?*

A: I'm not unbiased – I supported the exhibition and provided a lot of source material – but what I find most compelling is its central idea: that my father's transcultural background, especially his Chinese heritage, shaped everything about his life and career. If ever there was proof of the richness of the immigrant experience, this is it... The show also highlights different chapters of his career – from post-war real-estate development to pioneering new materials and technologies to reintroducing art and artists into the architectural conversation. What comes through consistently is his conviction that architecture is a dialogue between past and present, tradition and innovation.

Q: *Your personal favourites from the two shows?*

A: Each project responds to different challenges. I deeply admire his pioneering work in low-cost housing, and his lifelong obsession with advancing concrete technology. The house he designed for our family is one of his most exquisite projects... the Everson Museum in Syracuse, which he designed in the early 60s, probably influenced my own decision to become an architect. But if I had to choose his most consequential project, it would be the Grand Louvre, completed in 1989. That commission engaged every aspect of his skill set: architect, tactician, historian, diplomat.

Q: *What kind of reception have the shows received?*

A: In Hong Kong and Shanghai, the exhibition was met with great anticipation and celebration. My father's heritage has secured him a place in the nation's pantheon of historical figures.

In Doha, the response has been equally positive. He designed the Museum of Islamic Art there, which has become a national landmark. The exhibition introduced his career to a new audience – many young Arabs who seemed impressed, maybe even inspired, by his example.

Q: *I.M. Pei had an eclectic sense of design, marrying western and eastern styles. Please comment.*

A: My father was truly a global citizen. He had this uncanny ability to flourish in different contexts and communities at the same time. As an architect, he was fascinated by the cultures he encountered and the traditions that shaped their architecture – form, materials, spaces, all of it.

I wouldn't call his work 'eclectic' though. I'd say it was contextual, always rooted in the spirit of place. His buildings were harmonious with the past, yet sophisticated in craft, rigorous in detail, and technologically advanced. What people admire most, I think, is how comfortably his buildings fit into their environment... Throughout the exhibition, you see his single-minded focus on quality, refinement, and appropriateness. He lived by Vitruvius' values of 'firmness, commodity, and delight', leaving behind buildings of enduring value and civic pride.

Read the full interview on magazine.thehindu.com

GETTY IMAGES

ALLEGEDLY

WAITING FOR ‘SANCHAR SWATI’

Up next: a constellation of apps that, after pre-installation, will work in sync to keep Indians secure

Contrary to media reports, Mr. S. Saathi is not a myth but a real person. Like the app he built for the government, he lurks – and works – in the background. After much coaxing, he agreed to give me an exclusive interview. Excerpts:

Q: *Sir, most Indian entrepreneurs believe it is not easy to work with the government. But people like you and Mr. Bandan Balcony have been successfully doing it for a long time. What's your secret?*
A: I have a simple funda, which is also followed by every aspiring trillionaire in the country: pre-installation.

Q: *Pre-installation?*
A: Yes. Before I started working with the government, I pre-installed my own ‘*saathis*’ in the root operating system of the bureaucracy. This protects my financial security the same way Sanchar Saathi would have helped billions of Indians with their cyber-security – if only the government hadn't reversed the pre-installation mandate.

Q: *Did you anticipate this reversal?*
A: Of course not. Who expects the government to actually listen to the people? Today, if you back down on privacy, next they may expect you to stop working for cronies. Then they will start demanding clean air, affordable healthcare, and living wages. There is no end to their demands! It's dangerous to go down that road.

Q: *But isn't it good for the business ecosystem to respect privacy?*
A: The first principle of ease of doing business is that the government should not take policy advice from citizens. On any matter – be it about land, labour, environment or privacy - it doesn't matter what the people want. What matters is your true *saathi* – by which I mean, whoever puts their wallet where your mouth is.

Q: *But sir, India is a democracy.*
A: How old are you – 12? Democracy or no democracy, any government's primary duty is to monitor citizens, wash their brains regularly in WhatsApp detergent, and keep them under control. If we have to start listening to the people, what answer will we give to electoral bond donors? What are foreign consultants for? Look at me – I'm a U.K. citizen, my wife is a Japanese citizen, my son is a French citizen, and my daughter is an Australian citizen. I have no personal stakes in the future of this country. Yet I am working 22 hours a day, seven days a week, in India's national capital and world's pollution capital. Why? Because though my bank accounts are Swiss, my heart is Indian. That's why I was shocked to see the government reversing its order based on fake news spread by privacy fundamentalists. But this is not over.

Q: *But at some point, a democratically elected government should also listen to the people, right? Otherwise how will it get re-elected?*
A: Of course it should. That's the whole point of Sanchar Saathi! It is custom-built to listen to people 24x7 – not only to what they are saying in their normal calls, but also over WhatsApp and Telegram. It will also pay attention to where you are going, who you are meeting, whose pictures you are taking, and what anti-national stuff you have in your external and internal storage. All that people had to do to enjoy these benefits was to let the app be pre-installed on their phone – but such a small thing also Indians couldn't do for the three-time elected, most corruption-free government in the history of India.

Q: *I apologise on behalf of all Indians. But isn't user consent important?*
A: Consent? ‘Sanchar Saathi’ literally means ‘communication partner’, not ‘sexual partner’. You are talking as if your smartphone is an innocent girl and the app is a politician heading the wrestling federation.

Q: *What are your future plans?*
A: We are developing a constellation of apps that, after pre-installation, will work in sync with Sanchar Saathi. Currently, we are beta-testing Sanchar Swati, which will automatically purify people's phones of all the stuff they shouldn't have downloaded in the first place. Then we have Sanchar Aashiq, which will alert the parents of youngsters who fall in love with the wrong person. But I am most excited about Sanchar Potty.

Q: *I'm sorry?*
A: It's the first such app in the world. Upload the photo of any sample, and it will use stool recognition technology to tell you what that person has been eating in the previous 24 hours. If beef happens to be one of the items, it will automatically alert the authorities.

Q: *Amazing! Didn't think such innovation was possible in a government set-up.*
A: Never underestimate us.

G. Sampath, the author of this satire, is Social Affairs Editor, The Hindu.

GOREN BRIDGE

The Pollenz family

Both vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

The Pollenz family, from southern Long Island in New York, has been well respected in local bridge circles for over half a century. The two brothers, Ralph and Emmett, had a successful tournament partnership back in the '60s and '70s. Two of Ralph's sons, Mitchell and Alex, and Emmett's daughter Lynne, all became well-respected players on the local scene, with few forays into tournament bridge. We have enjoyed games with all of them except Lynne, and we would happily have played bridge with her if we ever had the chance. Mitchell Pollenz was West in today's deal.

The opening spade lead went to East's 10 and South's king. Despite plenty of points, there were not enough tricks, and declarer had to go to work. He led the nine of spades to dummy's ace, East playing the four, and then led a club to his jack, losing to the king. Mitchell could see what was coming. He knew declarer had three spades from East's count signal. If South had five hearts, he would have played on hearts for extra tricks. If South had four diamonds, he would have played on diamonds.

South had to have three clubs and would cash the ace next, felling East's queen, and take the marked finesse for the nine of clubs. Mitchell tried to thwart this by returning the nine of clubs! Declarer, of course, played the 10 from dummy and could no longer take three club tricks. South could still have prevailed with clairvoyant play, but when he led a spade to the queen next, he lost all chance. Very nice play.

NORTH
♠ A Q 8 3
♡ 7 6
◇ J 3 2
♣ 10 8 5 4

WEST
♠ 7 6
♡ A 10 3 2
◇ 9 6 4
♣ K 9 7 6

EAST
♠ J 10 5 4
♡ J 9 4
◇ Q 10 8 5
♣ Q 3

SOUTH
♠ K 9 2
♡ K Q 8 5
◇ A K 7
♣ A J 2

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
2NT	Pass	3♣	Pass
3◇	Pass	3NT	All pass

Opening lead: Seven of ♠

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has December 14 ever given us?

Inaugurated on December 14, 2004, the Millau Viaduct is a cable-stayed bridge that spans a gorge valley in France. (GETTY IMAGES)

Berty Ashley

1 On December 14, 1656, M. Jacquin manufactured a certain artificial jewellery for the first time in Paris. He used gypsum pellets as a base and covered them with fish scales to achieve a nacreous, lustrous appearance similar to the original organic material. What had he created that was a significant development in the jewellery world?

2 On December 14, 1900, German Physicist Max Planck presented the theoretical derivation of his black-body radiation law to the Physics Society. He proposed that energy is not continuous but emitted and absorbed in small packets. This was the foundation for what field of physics?

3 On December 14, 1911, a team of intrepid explorers led by Norwegian Roald Amundsen became the first people on record to reach a certain geographic location. He had become the first to sail through the Northwest Passage a few years earlier, and later in 1926, he also set foot on the exact opposite side of the planet. Where did the team land on this date?

4 Born on December 14, 1922, Nikolay Basov was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1964 for his work on quantum electronics. This led to the development of a process of light amplification based on the stimulated emission of radiation. How well do we know this technology?

5 On December 14, 1940, a team of scientists from the University of California, Berkeley, led by Glenn Seaborg, isolated a new element by bombarding Uranium-238 with deuterons. They kept the discovery a secret till 1948, after WWII was over. What element was responsible for the horrors at Nagasaki?

6 On December 14, 1947, Bill France Sr. founded the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing in Daytona Beach, Florida. Known for its many years of land-speed-record attempts, he wanted a system of racing where the driver was paid well and fairly. Now, it is one of the biggest sports in the U.S.; by what name is his project known?

7 On December 14, 1948, Thomas T. Goldsmith Jr. and Estle Ray Mann were granted a patent for their CRT amusement device. It simulated an artillery shell moving towards a target, and by adjusting the knobs, one could change the trajectory. This was the earliest known interactive electronic game. What did the CRT stand for?

8 Born on December 14, 1953, in Madras, this man is a prominent sportscaster who has also starred in a James Bond film and a *Star Trek* film. At one time, he was World #18 and had defeated the likes of Björn Borg, Rod Laver and John McEnroe. Who is this athlete?

9 On December 14, 1972, Eugene Cernan and Harrison Schmitt stepped out of the lander and completed the third and final extravehicular activity of their mission. If this was the Apollo 17 mission, what is special about this activity?

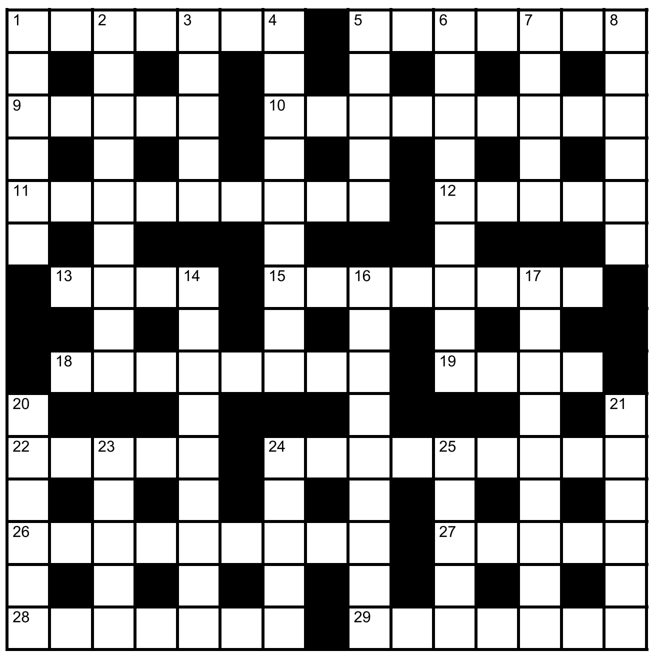
10 Inaugurated on December 14, 2004, the Millau Viaduct is a cable-stayed bridge that spans a gorge valley in France. One of the greatest engineering achievements in history, it held a certain record for over 20 years till the Changtai Yangtze River Bridge was opened in China in September. What record is this?

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called ‘Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion’. @bertyashley

Answers

1. Artificial pearls
2. Quantum Physics ('quanta' being packets)
3. The South Pole
4. LASER
5. Plutonium
6. NASCAR
7. Cathode Ray Tube (It was basically an old-style TV)
8. Vijay Amritharaj
9. The last human to walk on the moon
10. The tallest bridge in the world

THE HINDU SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 34 (Set by Arden)



Across

1 Pornographic books hidden by back cover which is fat (7)
5 In fact internal condition is highly respected (7)
9 Alternate proof — assets provide some food (5)
10 Country rejected plan to introduce one dress (9)
11 Potatoes bag in parts of the Netherlands (9)
12 Start growing thorny rose plant (5)
13 Responsibility — where it lies when we undertake to do something (4)
15 Ones getting married on board can be emulated (8)
18 It obeys Boyle's law — perfect perhaps, NO? (5,3)
19 Bite insect in return (4)
22 Signore Mitchell securing pardon (5)
24 Group accepting torn bill is swelling (9)
26 Remove unwanted starch from tetrasaccharide somehow (9)
27 African leaders totally under the same illusion (5)
28 Way to describe "Short story of an Italian dish" (7)
29 In support of school showing no interest in computer language (7)

Down

1 Don't have complaint about Republicans headed by Trump (6)
2 Maybe gained about a pound after central fund became nonpartisan (9)
3 Times set up pieces of information (5)
4 Bank getting old in America is running riot (9)
5 Last of the herd killed and cut up (5)
6 Mixed gin and tonic — not only cold but cross (9)
7 Private banquet, democrats missing (5)
8 Head of department committed a crime and covered it up (6)
14 Going over, accepting a contract giving set of dimensions... (9)
16 ...even though it opens out providing covers (2,5,2)
17 House subsequently stored blue cans (9)
20 Trial order done, approval to pick outsiders (6)
21 Standard, almost close to mark... (6)
23 ...randomly, so man complains (5)
24 Stop close to line, in case... (5)
25 Sad, half-heartedly he takes a nibble (5)

SOLUTION NO. 33

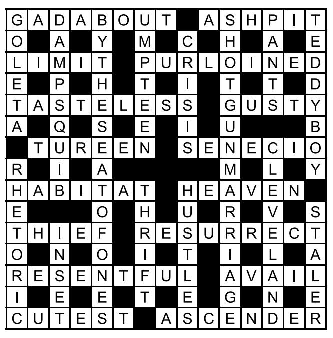


ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

For better and for verse

Writing poetry is not for those weak in art or the faint of heart

Jairam N. Menon
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Since prose was not getting me very far, friends advised me to switch to Plan B – poetry. I was hesitant, wondering if I could express myself as eloquently. My friends – dear souls whom I've known for years – assured me there was nothing to worry since I would only be moving from bad to verse. Helpfully, encouragement came my way with the realisation that once I began flying high on the wings of the iambic pentameter or maybe even the trochaic tetrameter, I could bid a grateful goodbye to the birth pangs involved in conjuring an insightful essay or intriguing short story.

Also, it's a fact universally acknowledged that poets walk a metre above mean sea level and stand higher up the pecking order than the garden variety of writers.

I already had under my belt what I believed were impressive professional credentials. In my salad days, I used to be a sought-after cocktail-party balladeer thanks to my ability to deftly pair words with a common end-rhyme. The way I saw it then, it was only rhyme that helped mankind distinguish a poem from, say, a menu card or shopping list. So I promptly set off on a spree, rhyming 'beginning' with 'tingling', 'strife' with 'wife', and 'distant star' with 'idli sambar'. Too late, I was told by experts that rhymes were out of fashion – in fact, they had gone out with bell-bottoms. As per current thought, it's a crime to rhyme.

The next stumbling block was meter – that perplexing pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables – which is the platform on which poetry runs. I did my best to put iambic pentameter and all the rest of it into play. Experts chipped in to advise that good poetry is "read" by the ears and that saying the lines out loud would help with the meter. I did as bid only to find myself out of depth and also out of breath. Despite strenuous efforts, the best I could muster was a weak imitation of Descartes – "I think, therefore iamb."

Next, the million-dollar question: what could I wax lyrical about? Daffodils, nightingales, and Grecian urns have all been taken. What was left was the depressing stuff that makes today's newspaper headlines. A clear case, you could say, of poetic injustice. But there's no court of appeal, not even a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Poets.

I recalled a French poet saying the first line in every poem is given by God, and the poet supplies the rest. Well, at the risk of blasphemy, I must say that He ... well, we'll let that pass. Obviously, He has more pressing things to attend to than the writer's block of a fledgling poet. No wonder, Dylan Thomas called poetry his "sullen art".

Desperate situations call for desperate measures. I began scouting for poetry clubs across the land. These groups comprise poets who, believing in safety in numbers, congregate at exotic places far from the madding crowd. Here, they spend fruitful hours listening to and learning from each other's poems. I had hoped that I too would gain inspiration through osmosis. Alas! My muse had blown a fuse.

There I lay, like Eliot's evening sky, like a patient etherised upon a table. There I would have lain had my old friends not returned making conciliatory noises, offering sometimes sympathy and sometimes tea. They told me even established poets experience self-doubt of Hamletian proportions. Who was I to expect better luck? Also, though my venture into verse had met with a lack of success as spectacular as the Charge of the Light Brigade, the enterprise had not entirely been in vain. It was character-building, and I had learnt something of value: poetry is not for those weak in art or faint of heart.

So, to all practising poets, young and old, my hats off!

The joy of accomplishment

Poovannan E.
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There is a special kind of joy that comes when we truly earn something – when our hard work and patience finally translate into a sense of purpose. I still remember the pride I felt after clearing my first job interview – not just for myself, but for the happiness it brought to my family. As I walked back towards my hostel that evening, memories of every small struggle and moment of learning flashed before my eyes.

When I was a child, having a bicycle was a dream. My father once told me, "Get first rank, and we'll see about the cycle." By luck or effort, I managed it once. He didn't buy me a new one – instead, he brought home an old bicycle from a friend. Yet, that moment felt priceless. It wasn't about the newness of the cycle but the sense of having earned it.

Today, I often notice how easily we reward our children. In many homes, wishes are fulfilled instantly – sometimes even before they are fully expressed. Somewhere, in this act of constant giving, we might be taking away the joy of earning. A simple habit like saving in a piggy bank and buying something after months of waiting can teach children more about satisfaction, value, and care than any instant purchase ever could.

Accomplishment is deeply tied to effort. During our college days, graduation day used to mark years of learning, perseverance, and friendship. These days, we even see 'graduation ceremonies' for pre-KG children – an idea that certainly brings joy and excitement to young hearts. Yet, as we celebrate these small beginnings, it's also worth remembering the value of milestones that come after sustained effort.

In our early days, we had a sense of responsibility – to repay a loan, to make our family proud, to stand on our own feet. That same spark pushes many of us forward – from winning our first prize in school, to earning our first certificate, to completing a long-postponed goal.

True accomplishment comes when we commit ourselves to something meaningful. Taking your parents on a long trip, running a marathon, or simply achieving a small personal goal can bring immense satisfaction. Real success is not measured by speed or status, but by purpose. It's about working towards something that gives meaning.

Balancing high tech and high touch

Successful leaders strike the right balance between technology and personal interaction

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

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High tech represents the use of advanced tools such as AI and automation, whereas 'high touch' emphasises personalised human interaction, emotional connection and specialised care. When these two approaches are blended, technology offers efficiency and convenience, while the human element ensures warmth and emotional value – an especially powerful combination in the service industry.

In today's digital world, individuals who continuously upgrade, update, and adapt to technological changes gain a significant edge in achieving success. We have all witnessed how advanced technologies have transformed our lives – making them easier, faster, and more convenient. AI and machine learning not only simplify tasks but also enhance productivity, improve standards of living, and add to our physical comfort.

The impact of advanced technologies spans across nearly every field – manufacturing, sales and marketing, business development, banking and finance, healthcare and medicine, logistics and distribution, agriculture, academics, space, safety and security, and environmental management.

Digital technologies, particularly AI, have freed us from repetitive and time-consuming tasks that demand excessive time, money, and energy. Even the service industry has greatly benefited, improving efficiency and customer satisfaction. AI and ML are now integral to organisations – right from product identification, product planning and development, all the way to delivery to the end consumers. In short, the adoption of advanced technologies has made operations truly 'high tech', delivering benefits to all stakeholders in terms of quality, productivity, cost-efficiency, and faster and more convenient customer service.

However, despite these advantages, technology has its limitations. A lack of 'high touch'– the human element of empathy, personal interaction, and care – often leaves the customer experience incomplete or less fulfilling. For the long-term sustenance of a brand – whether it is a product or a service – marketers must go beyond adding high-tech features. They need to carefully assess customer satisfaction levels and position their offerings in a way that fosters a strong emotional connection between the consumer and the brand. In some organisations, HR departments are relying too heavily on technology for evaluating, training, and grooming people – which is not ideal. After all, humans are not machines. Building an emotional connection with employees fosters stronger engagement, higher performance, and better results for the organisation.

The successful leaders of tomorrow will be those who harness AI for critical decision-making, analytics, and automation, while maintaining a human-centric approach.

The generation that forgot to rest

People struggle to relax because scrolling has become a habit

Abinaya Kannan
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GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

Technology has made life faster and more convenient, but for the younger generation, it has also quietly turned into a source of stress. Work and studies no longer end when one steps out of the building – our phones keep us constantly available and make us respond to messages, emails and tasks even late at night. Social media adds another layer of pressure by making everyone look successful, active and happy all the time, making one question her own progress.

Even during free time, one struggles to relax because scrolling has become a habit, stretching to sleepless nights and battles with tiredness in the mornings.

People seems to have been trained to hustle, to always do more, achieve more, and show more, as if resting is something to feel guilty about. This continuous pressure is affecting mental health in ways one does not always notice – anxiety, headaches, self-doubt, loneliness, and burnout are quietly becoming part of everyday life. But one deserves more than just surviving each day.

Sometimes, switching off notifications, taking real breaks, going outside, or simply enjoying moments without capturing them is enough to remind one that life is more than screens and schedules. One must remember that achievements are not measured by online likes or constant productivity. It is perfectly okay to pause, breathe, and live for oneself, not for the audience on the screen. This generation is strong, smart, and capable, but must protect its peace to truly enjoy the future one is working so hard for.

So, let's make a promise to ourselves – to take back control of time, peace, and happiness.

One small step each day: a little less screen, a little more life. Because the world can wait for a moment, but wellbeing should not.

magazine

GOODBYE, DELHI

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

Staying in Delhi has become nothing short of an open arrest. ('Goodbye, Delhi'; Dec. 7) Every year, people experience flooding during the monsoon, flight delays due to fog or smog, fireworks restrictions during Diwali, and traffic congestion all through the year. This has taken out the charm of staying in the national capital. Delhi is no more a city for the common man. It has been reduced to a fiefdom of the rich and powerful.
Rammohan N. Swamy

I am a Class II student from Visakhapatnam. I read in the article about the family who moved from Delhi to Hyderabad because of air pollution. I have learnt that pollution can affect our health, especially our lungs. The article teaches us that we should not pollute the air. Delhi is already very polluted, and if the situation worsens, it will become more challenging to live there. I love nature and I want to keep the air clean.
S. Sarithra

Delhi needs bold, out-of-the-box solutions beyond piecemeal fixes. Treating pollution as a disaster, and innovating, coordinating regionally, and engaging citizens can lead to lasting change. Lessons from Beijing — strict enforcement, cleaner energy, vehicle caps, and cooperation — show dramatic results. With government reforms, technology, and community participation, Delhi can break free from toxic air and build a healthier, sustainable future.
O. Prasada Rao

Choose empathy

Salman Rushdie's *The Eleventh Hour* reminds us that survival is not only a personal act, but a collective responsibility. ('Rushdie and his magic space'; Dec. 7) His stories remind us to pause and see each other again. It is a warning, but also an invitation to choose empathy before it is too late.
Sahal Cholayil

Eco-tragedy

The Green Humour cartoon (Dec. 7) is a comment on us citizens not making any efforts to prevent the planned ecocide in the Nicobar islands.
B. Sundar Raman

True love

The heart-warming roles played by dogs in movies often leave a lasting impression on animal lovers. ('Canine comeback'; Dec. 7) The unconditional love displayed by these creatures is irreplaceable and it makes the world a better place.
Monita Sutherson

Cultural impact

The festival's evolution from a niche gathering to a wider cultural movement is encouraging, given its focus on access, inclusivity, and cross-disciplinary exchange. ('Serendipity's decade shift'; Dec. 7) Yet, as the event expands across cities, consistency in quality and community engagement will be key. Cultural festivals risk becoming spectacle-driven if local talent, public spaces, and long-term learning are not prioritised.
K. Sakunthala

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Menace of trolling
Outrage sells, and algorithms reward it. Yet, lawmakers remain blind, and platform moderators stay indifferent
K. Suresh Babu

Rediscovering 'joy' beyond the screen
Laughter with friends lingers longer than laughter at a meme; a handwritten note feels warmer than a text
Vivek Gundimi

Beeps, weeps, and hope
When life edges back toward normalcy, joy ripples through the ICU
Kattamreddy Ananth Rupesh

A memorable first day
The first day at school or college, or the first time one leaves home stays fresh in memory
J. Clement Selvaraj

Contributions of up to a length of 700 words may be e-mailed to: openpage@thehindu.co.in Please provide the postal address and a brief background of the writer. The mail must certify that it is original writing, exclusive to this page. The Hindu views plagiarism as a serious offence. Given the large volume of submissions, we regret that we are unable to acknowledge receipt or entertain queries about submissions. If a piece is not published for eight weeks please consider that it is not being used. The publication of a piece on this page is not to be considered an endorsement by The Hindu of the views contained therein.

THE HINDU magazine
Sunday, December 14, 2025

Vimoo Sanghvi; and (far left) her travels influenced her works — inspired by Inca pottery, which combined sculptural forms with utilitarian spouts, she created playful pots.

VIMOO SANGHVI, THE CLAY WHISPERER

A retrospective on one of India's first studio potters tracks three decades of crafting and countless experimentations

Deepthi Sasidharan

Ceramicist Vimoo Sanghvi was a potter and a pathbreaker. One of India's pioneering studio pottery artists, she often said that pottery "kept her alive". But the reverse was equally true: a woman artist who strove to keep the art form pertinent at a time when the medium wasn't as popular.

Trained in England and based in Bombay, where she exhibited extensively, her repertoire is little known. But a retrospective is now helping correct that gap. *Whispering Clay: Celebrating a Life in Ceramics*, her showcase that opened earlier this year in Mumbai, is travelling to Kochi, in time for the sixth edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. The show is a fluid exposition of the master artist who worked with equal proficiency in throwing on the wheel, slip casting, carving and incising, and sculptural forms.

Her 'magnificent obsession', as her son, journalist and writer Vir Sanghvi, recalls, was the story of a woman who pushed the boundaries of her time and of technical perfection. Vimoo experimented with scale, moved away from the pastels of western pottery to create earthy indigenous glazes, steered her British pedagogy to Indian silhouettes and shapes, and established her own unique repertoire at a time when the Progressive Art Movement was sweeping across Bombay.

Learning from the Modernists

The idea of pottery first fascinated Vimoo as a young mother living in south Bombay. The daughter of a wealthy Gujarati industrialist (born in 1920), she chose formal training in England at the Willesden Art School in the '50s.

In the early '60s, with an imported wheel and kiln that she set up a studio in Churchgate, Vimoo joined the modern arts movement of the time – watching the first contours of modernist painting in India being defined and seeking to do the same in her work. As her hands mastered clay, she moved to abstract expressionism, the Cubist style she observed among Bombay's Progressive, and to forms that were not always utilitarian, influenced by her extensive travels in America and Europe. Kristine Micheal, curator of *Whispering Clay*, says that "she had a direct impact on the development of early studio pottery and ceramic art in Mumbai – be it with her contemporaries like Primula Pandit, as well as artisans like B.R. Pandit and Ismail Kumbhar".

1. Vimoo displays her skill at the wheel with shapes that slightly break the perfect profile of pottery shapes; **2.** sculptural forms made with the coiling technique; **3.** from her last series *By the Sea*, this work is complex and textured; **4.** stoneware that shows her mastery over form and glaze; **5.** Vimoo shows her command in sculpting clay into forms that seem familiar and yet is unusual.

A distinctly Indian aesthetic

Her work with traditional potters in Dharavi, who prepared her clay and fired her bisque pieces, and teaching stints at the JJ School of Art also influenced her decision to turn to India for inspiration. From her choice of colours to her motifs – sometimes religious or drawn from indigenous communities and vernacular landscape, such as *rangoli* designs and the Ajanta-style swans – she forged a path that was entirely her own. Her last burst of creativity drew from the Arabian Sea that she saw daily, with elements of coral and textures based on the sea.

Whispering Clay focuses on it all: her idea of beauty in the everyday, the influence of artists such as Japanese master potter Sōetsu Yanagi, her ability to bridge the East and the West. It is a lesson in experimentation and exploration for studio potters today.

Whispering Clay: Celebrating a Life in Ceramics *– curated by Kristine Michael and facilitated by Ranvir Shah, Prakriti Foundation, and Raaj and Mallika Sanghvi – is on view at the OED Gallery, Mattancherry.*

The writer is the founder-director of Eka Archiving Services.

While at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2025-26

The sixth edition will showcase the works of 66 artists from 25 countries across 22 venues. Here are six to catch:

Gulam Mohammed Sheikh's *Of Worlds Within Worlds*
Curated by Roobina Karode, the retrospective traces the painter's artistic evolution, from early expressions of personal memory to monumental works that celebrate humanity and critically examine global and contemporary politics. The showcase will have more than a hundred selected works from the museum's collection and loans from other institutions and private collections.
Presented by Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, at Durbar Hall

Ibrahim Mahama's *Parliament of Ghosts*
The large-scale installation explores Ghana's colonial past, post-independence struggle and collective memory using a haunting assemblage of abandoned objects such as jute sacks (once used to transport cocoa beans and charcoal, materials deeply tied to the country's histories of labour and commodity dependence), scrapped school furniture, and faded railway sleepers. Also encompassing painting, sculpture, photography and film, it evokes the histories and memories of Ghana and its people.
At Anand Warehouse

Marina Abramović's performance lecture
The U.S.-based conceptual artist will deliver a performance lecture that traces her artistic journey. But till she arrives in February, her presence will be marked at the KMB by her immersive projection *Waterfall* and a presentation by the Marina Abramović Institute (MAI) Archive — which will highlight a collection of long-duration works and their corresponding documentation. *Waterfall* is a video installation depicting 108 Tibetan monks and nuns chanting the *Heart Sutra,* one of Buddhism's most profound texts.
First week of February, at Island Warehouse

Vivan Sundaram's *Six Stations of a Life Pursued*
The installation debuted at the Sharjah Biennale in 2023 shortly after the artist's death. It consists of sequences of photography-based works created in collaboration with artists such as Hilal Ahmed Khan, Anita Khemka, Imran Kokiloo, and Harish Khanna — focusing on the body, whether in isolation or in relationship to surroundings with specific political resonances.
At Cube Arts Space

Island Mural Project
A new initiative by the Kochi Biennale Foundation, the Project brings art to public spaces in conversation with communities and regional histories. The first edition will have artists and collectives such as Aravani Art Project, Munir Kabani, Osheen Siva, Pradip Das, and Trespassers painting murals on select walls, creating spaces for connection, reflection, and shared belonging — inviting everyone to experience the neighbourhood in a new light.
Across Fort Kochi and Mattancherry

Otobong Nkanga's garden
The Belgium-based visual artist and tapestry maker examines the interconnectedness between humans and land within the contexts of resource extraction, colonisation, and migration. At the KMB, she will nurture an outdoor garden that mirrors the region's biodiversity — native and non-native varieties of fruiting and flowering plants — and the deep connection between the soil and cultural memory.
At 111 Markaz & Cafe, Mattancherry

Mapping an empire of exchange

CSMVS's new study gallery repositions history as something tactile and open, inviting engagement

Aastha D.

Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS) has opened a daring experiment in how we teach, and feel, history. 'Networks of the Past: A Study Gallery of India and the Ancient World' assembles more than 300 archaeological objects from 15 Indian and international museums to argue a simple but potent claim: ancient India was not isolated, it was central to global exchange.

Designed as a study gallery, it strings together Harappan seals and pottery, Mesopotamian cuneiform, Egyptian sculpture (even a cat mummy), Greek and Roman portraits, Chinese ceramics and jade, coins, inscriptions and everyday objects so students and the public can read antiquity as evidence, not myth. The timeline runs from the Sindhu-Sarasvati (Harappan) civilisation, roughly 5,000 years ago, to the Gupta age of the sixth century CE, and culminates by placing Nalanda and Alexandria – two great knowledge economies of the ancient world – in conversation, reminding visitors that ideas have always travelled as vigorously as goods.

In a moment when historical thinking is increasingly constrained by textbook revisions and shrinking space for critical inquiry, this project creates an alternative route into the past: one grounded in material evidence, shared human questions, and a sense of intellectual play.

'A history beginners' toolkit'

Over four years, CSMVS co-curated the gallery with partner institutions including the British Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Benaki Museum (Athens) and others, supported by Getty's Sharing Collections Programme. Indian and international curators jointly selected objects and co-authored interpretive frameworks aimed at Indian audiences.

That pedagogical ambition is explicit. CSMVS has built a neighbouring learning centre, Nalanda, and stitched the gallery into university partnerships. More than 20 institutions will structure courses around original objects. Audio guides, short films, a dedicated website, and outreach through its Museum on Wheels and Trunk Museum projects (outreach programmes featuring mobile museums and themed trunks filled with artefacts) promise to take curated encounters beyond metropolitan elites and into schools across the country.

Crucially, many of the loans are long-term: the gallery will remain on view for three years, allowing sustained engagement. As Renuka Muthuswamy, Assistant Curator (International Relations), notes, this format "functions almost as an ancient history beginners' toolkit for Indian students", bringing together what is often taught "in a chronologically dissonant manner" into a single, coherent experience.

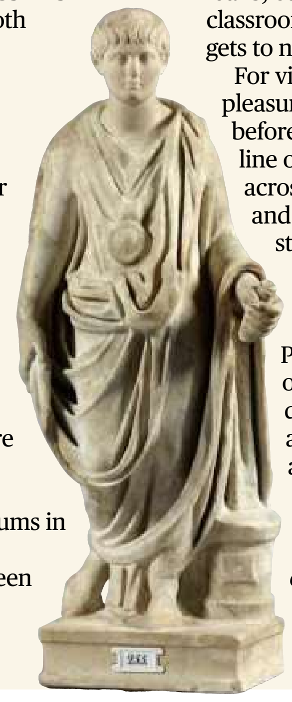
The gallery is also a corrective to the old museum grammar that placed the Mediterranean at the centre of ancient world histories. By foregrounding exchange – trade networks, shared technologies, migratory motifs – CSMVS reframes India as both contributor and beneficiary in a pan-continental tapestry. "Stories in museums are often presented in a linear format to an assumed 'homogeneous' audience," explains Nilanjana Som, curator (Art). "But audiences are diverse, Indian audiences even more so." This matters politically and intellectually: museums in formerly colonised regions have long been arenas where authority over the past is contested. Co-curation and shared custodianship, as practised here, are pragmatic answers to that contestation. "By looking through each others' eyes, we see these objects afresh," states Thorsten Opper, lead curator, Greek & Roman Sculpture, The British Museum.

Test case for Indian museum practice

There are limits, of course. No matter what a gallery selects, omissions and emphases will invite debate. Still, the project's scale and its explicit educational purpose make it a test case for Indian museum practice: can objects provoke public reasoning rather than passive admiration? Can long loans, co-written labels and classroom partnerships shift who gets to narrate the past?

For visitors, the immediate pleasure is elemental: to stand before a seal or a coin and feel a line of human choices extend across millennia. For educators and curators, the value is structural: a model for conversation between museums, scholars and the public. Networks of the Past does not close the book on antiquity; it opens a desktop of questions that ask to be read, taught and argued over.

(Clockwise from left) A carved relief of the cremation of Buddha; bust of Ptolemy II; funeral statue of a Roman boy; and a Mithuna sculpture.



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